

What is Your Clarion Call?

By Dr. Lorraine J. Haricombe

A career in library and information science is based on core values of the profession to ensure equal access to information as a foundation for an informed citizenry, for lifelong learning and enhancement of a learning society. Simply put, libraries are fundamental institutions in democratic societies to ensure that all sections of society are brought into the democratic process. Librarians are the collectors and stewards of the human record; they are organizers of the information resources they collect, adding value by making them discoverable. They take pride in preserving the knowledge of the past and present, and safeguarding it for the future.

Librarianship as a practice has existed for millennia. Long before Gutenberg invented printing, sources of information have been organized, described and preserved in various formats. Later, those practices shaped the core of librarianship as a profession. Libraries as gatekeepers in a predominantly analog world, and later as gateways in a digital world, have demonstrated their ability to re-engineer themselves and remain relevant to their users' needs. That transformation of libraries, in turn, has prompted professionals to repurpose their skills for new and different roles. This is, indeed, an exciting time to be a librarian. The professional degree, however, offers only an entry point into the profession. It is a first step to position library and information professionals as members within a larger ecosystem.

Beyond the professional degree it is helpful to articulate the impact of your skills more broadly, and not only in traditional librarianship; that is just one path to employ your skills and competencies. Library and information professionals are uniquely qualified to apply knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills across disciplines in appropriate and effective ways. Avoid falling into the perfectionist trap by keeping the big picture in mind.

Use systems level thinking to understand how and why libraries and library use are changing. The whole (system) is greater than the sum of its parts (components), because the relationship among the elements adds value to the system. Look for stakeholders with common or complementary goals to form new partnerships. Assume shared responsibility for collaborative work, and value the individual contributions made by each team member.

Today's professional relies on the ability to respond quickly to change. Most job advertisements state a preference, if not a requirement, for applicants to be able to work in a changing environment. Professionals who embrace that requirement and who show flexibility and a willingness to be helpful in making necessary compromises will be an asset to their organizations to accomplish common goals.

Everyone is a potential leader. Leadership is more than a position; it can be enacted by anyone. Professionals who demonstrate enthusiasm to take on initiatives to lead or manage change wherever they may reside in the organization are practicing leadership. They make a choice to make things happen and to make a difference. Ambler (2013) suggests that instead of asking "am I the leader" ask "am I exercising leadership" to advance common goals?

Seize the opportunity to learn, to mature and to make unique contributions to your organization and beyond. As a professional, you have a responsibility to keep your skills and knowledge up to date. Investing in professional development starts with a commitment to personal development. Taking a committed approach to your continuing professional development will enable you to have a toolkit of skills, knowledge, insight and understanding that will develop your potential to become a leader – and take your career to the next level.

Allow passion not pedigree to fuel success in your career. When I hire individuals I look for knowledgeable and confident individuals. I also look for passion and drive. Success comes not so much from **what** we do (our job), but **how well** we do it (our passion). Direct your career to incorporate what truly excites and invigorates you.

Broaden your horizons, challenge yourself, surprise yourself! There is room for growth every day. Sometimes you win, sometimes you learn. Never measure your unlimited potential by your limited expectations.

Despite new and exciting roles for librarians, the well-rooted stereotypes of librarians and information professionals remain. The Libraries Transform Campaign (2009-2015), an American Library Association (ALA) initiative, is designed to increase public awareness of the value, impact and services provided by libraries and library professionals. Libraries today are less about what they have for people (input) and more about what they do for and with people (output). Thus, library professionals have abundant opportunities to demonstrate their value to make a difference. They are catalysts, creators, counselors, change agents and entrepreneurs. They are uniquely skilled to provide essential services with the potential to empower, educate, transform and inspire individuals. They have transferable skills that can be used to help people in many different situations. Often at the forefront of embracing new technology, librarians are dynamic, data savvy, technically-skilled, progressive, innovative thinkers, who can put people together with information.

During the 2008 recession, libraries reported huge increases in visitor numbers and demands for specific job related resources and services. Librarians were there to counsel, educate and inspire individuals. Libraries have offered refuge in response to community needs in times of crises. In recent years, repurposed library spaces have offered a host of possibilities to promote the library as a place for hands-on learning and creative outputs that democratize creativity. Librarians increasingly are assuming these new roles to equip hopeful entrepreneurs to develop and produce their own creative projects. Librarians collaborate with educators to instill lifelong learning skills that students can transfer and apply beyond the university to the greater good of our knowledge-driven and globally oriented society. New opportunities, discussions and policies are informing and reframing the ways academic libraries are thinking about their role in the life of the institution. The strong connection between open access and the mission of libraries positions librarians optimally to lead new directions and services that assist their institutions in addressing changing needs that come with mandates for open access and data management.

Research has shown that the Internet is increasingly the information source of choice above all other. Online education consumers, fueled by mobile devices, new learning platforms and economic incentives, are trying and achieving success with new learning models. Librarians can maintain a competitive edge by equipping themselves with an understanding of the online user experience and the trends and triggers that are reshaping education.

These examples describe a rich diversity of exciting opportunities for in this profession. Use the power of story-telling to share the impact of your work. Create visibility for your work to transmit the value and passion for what you do using social media, conference presentations, poster sessions or open access publications. If you wait for the time to be perfect (or for you to be perfect) before you begin to try to make your mark you may never get started.

The ALA defined the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society as “helping to inform and educate the people of the United States on these problems and to encourage them to examine the many views on the facts regarding each problem.” (ALA Social Responsibility). This clarion call for libraries rang true especially during the 2016 presidential campaign.

The persistence of libraries as tools and agents of social change is imbedded in the history of civilization. Librarians’ passion, their patience and the impact of their work are well reflected in three recent publications. In a book review of *Fantasies of the Library*, Robert Darnton (2016) waxed eloquent about the power of the new Librarian of Congress to champion several issues, including copyright and open access, “to democratize access to our country’s culture” and issued a loud drum roll for librarians at nine thousand public libraries and four thousand college and university libraries to support her in doing so. In a NY Times bestseller, *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu*, Joshua Hammer vividly reports the story of a band of librarians’ passion and heroic efforts “to outwit Al Qaeda and preserve Mali’s – and the world’s- literary patrimony” (Brown, 2016). Finally, at a time when, more than ever, the news media’s role as a mediator and gatekeeper of civic discourse is being questioned, Jeffrey Rutenbeck, American University’s Dean of the School of Communication, proposes a way to tackle the problem: “I think journalists could learn a lot from hanging around with successful librarians. They’ve faced their own technological disruptions, and have responded by developing a set of principles to help their public assess the credibility of information and use it ethically. They call this framework “information literacy.” (Lief, 2016)

So, take pride in a profession that offers skills that are essential to one’s ability to function effectively and fully in our world: school, work, and life. These skills emphasize critical thinking: one cannot be a good communicator, good problem-solver, good collaborator, or good information seeker without careful and thoughtful participation in those processes. Possessing these skills (and having the disposition to apply them) enable us to tackle problems across multiple and varied contexts, as well as best utilize the knowledge we have acquired.

What will be your clarion call?

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